

JACK ANDERSON

The Washington Merry-go-round

12 years later: CIA reaction to our Mafia-Castro reports

F Post
5/3/79



WASHINGTON — It has taken 12 years to get the reaction of the Central Intelligence Agency to our stories on its recruitment of Mafia mobsters to assassinate Cuban Premier Fidel Castro.

Working under the late Drew Pearson, I produced two columns, dated March 3 and March 7, 1967, on the plot to kill Castro. CIA officials grimly refused to comment.

But President Lyndon Johnson demanded a full report from the CIA after he read our stories. We have obtained a still-secret report by the CIA's inspector general confirmed the essentials of the columns, conceded that the disclosures had caused "much distress" at the spy agency and discussed the ways in which the government could minimize the embarrassment.

"Drew Pearson's column of March 7, 1967 refers to a reported CIA plot in 1963 to assassinate Cuba's Fidel Castro," the inspector general wrote. "Pearson also has information, as yet unpublished, to the effect that there was a meeting at the State Department at which assassination of Castro was discussed, and that a team '(of three men)' actually landed in Cuba with (poison) pills to be used in an assassination attempt."

The report then says: "There is a basis in fact for each of those three reports."

In light of this uncomfortable accuracy, the inspector general asks: "Can we plausibly deny that we plotted with gangster elements to assassinate Castro?"

And the answer: "No. We cannot. We are reasonably confident that there is nothing in writing outside the government that would confirm Pearson's story of the operation, but there are plenty of non-gangster witnesses who could lend confirmation."

Well then, the inspector general asks, "Can CIA state or imply that it was merely an instrument of policy?" In other words, could the spooks pass the buck to the martyred President Kennedy?

"Not in this case," the report decides. "While it was true that (the later phase of the plots) was carried out in an atmosphere of intense Kennedy administration pressure to do something about Castro, such is not true of the earlier phase. (It) was initiated in August 1960 under the Eisenhower ad-

ministration."

The inspector general also concluded that the Castro assassination project could not be fobbed off as just a practice maneuver — part of the "Executive Action Capability" being developed by the CIA's clandestine operations arm.

It is still not known whether this "capability" program, code-named with ominous prescience "ZR-RIFLE," was requested by the Kennedy administration or developed by the CIA on its own.

Our stories raised the question whether then-Attorney General Robert Kennedy had approved the assassination plot. The secret report confirmed only that Kennedy "was fully briefed" on May 7, 1962. "A memorandum confirming the oral briefing was forwarded to Kennedy on 14 May 1962 . . . The memorandum does not use the word 'assassinate,' but there is little room for misinterpretation of what was meant."

But the inspector general stressed that Kennedy was told only about the first phase of the mobster-recruitment program. He was not told about the second phase, "which was well under way at the time (he) was briefed."

A further reason the Kennedy's couldn't be saddled with blame for the plots was that a key ingredient mentioned in our column was not known to the president and his brother. "The Pearson story, which is causing us so much distress, includes one detail that is found

only in Phase Two: the three-man team." If the CIA tried to foist responsibility onto the Kennedy's, the sources who told us about the three-man team could easily point out that the agency was lying.

"What measures might be taken to lessen the damage?" the rhetorically curious inspector general asks. A classic coverup was discarded as impractical.

"We cannot now suppress the story because it is already out," he concluded. "If we were to approach any of the participants and urge discretion upon him, and if this became known, it would merely lend credence to a tale that now sounds somewhat improbable."

So the agency maintained a stone wall of silence.

BUREAUCRATIC BROUHAHA: When federal bureaucrats get on their high horses, it's usually the public that

gets trampled underfoot.

A year-long stalemate between the General Services Administration and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare had effectively tied up 73 parcels of surplus government property in 24 states and Puerto Rico valued at \$20.8 million. Until the agencies settle their spat the land cannot be used by the local health and educational institutions for whom the properties are earmarked.

Typical of the frustrating result is the situation school officials of Fairfax County, Va., find themselves in. The county wants to build an elementary school on a former missile site deeded over for use as a park.

GSA and HEW spokesmen told our reporter Dave Carpenter that this would be a proper use of the surplus land, but an argument over policy has blocked the proposed construction. School officials estimate that inflation adds \$30,000 to \$35,000 to the cost of the school for each month's delay.

At issue in the bureaucratic brouhaha is GSA's decision to change longstanding government policy covering such property transfers. The policy was to require recipients of the surplus land to use it for certain specified purposes for 30 years or give it back to Uncle Sam. GSA says some local agencies have not been complying with the restrictions, and have decided to attach federal strings to the land permanently.

HEW refuses to abide by GSA's change in rules. Only the White House can arbitrate the squabble. Meanwhile, the surplus land lies fallow.

CAPITOL HANDYMAN: The title, Architect of the Capitol, conjures up visions of grand designs, slide rules and blueprints. But the architect also serves as Congress's florist, plumber and cleaning woman.

One part of the architect's small army of workers is the Orchid Division. According to the latest annual report, it was as busy as a bee at blossom time. More than 5,000 orchids were potted last year by the division; it grew 500 ferns and 150 philodendron cordatum, a veritable mountain of greenery to serve as backdrops for orchid displays.

The Capitol architect's green-thumb artists loaned 10,470 plants of various kinds to congressional offices (only 6,868 were returned), and provided more than 85,000 cut flowers for official events.

The capitol's plumbers and their friends were also busy. In the Rayburn House Office Building alone, 130 washbasins, 329 sinks and 435 toilets (by coincidence, the same number as there are congressmen) had to be unplugged during the year. In the other two House office buildings, 632 toilets were unstopped.

In all, the architect's staff made more than 62,000 service calls. Besides the plumbing runs, the chores included window washing, scrubbing corridors and polishing woodwork.